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East Timor: a foot in the door

On January 1 this year, Indonesia's President Suharto finally overruled his reluctanct Generals and opened up East Timor to foreigners. This decision, of course, has nothing to do with allowing the East Timorese greater freedom of association or movement. The motives behind it are partly economic (Jakarta is heavily in debt and hungry for the foreign exchange brought by tourism) and principally political being part of Indonesia's calculated campaign to improve its very poor human rights image and, in particular, to silence the critics who argue that denial of access is part of an elaborate cover-up of the situation in East Timor.

The first Australian to take advantage of the new policy is said to have been an oilrigger from Darwin who happened to be holidaying in West Timor when the opening up announcement was made. I and two colleagues from ACFOA followed in May when the opportunity arose during a visit to the region to make a brief, private visit for one day. We were, it seems, the first Australian NGO representatives to visit since ACFOA was effectively expelled by Indonesia ahead of the 1975 invasion.

Our visit was therefore an emotional experience. Given our long involvement with the issue, it was also spiced with a dash of suspense. Would we get in? What would we learn, if anything?

The answer to the first question was: yes, no problems. Regarding the second, the visit, though very brief, was surprisingly instructive.

Two impressions stand out. The first was our attendance at a Sunday Mass in Dili along with a huge crowd of some 800 East Timorese. The size and deeply reverent demeanour of this congregation confirmed what we had heard, namely that, in their dark night of the soul, the East Timorese have turned en masse to the Church for protection and advocacy. The occasion was also very much an East Timorese affair. The Mass was led by a Timorese priest and was celebrated in their own language of Tetum. Not a batik shirt was to be seen. Despite the overly sombre character of the liturgy, one felt very close to them in that setting, the only act of self-determination permitted by their Indonesian overlords. There was also time to reflect (the ceremony lasted two hours!) that the faith the Timorese have placed in the international Church has not been borne out in practice, though there have been some notable exceptions.

A second lasting impression is what one might call, cynically, that of the 'greening' of East Timor. On the Monday morning of our visit, the green uniforms of the Indonesian military were very much in evidence even to the casual visitor. We saw military helicopters in the sky and on the ground, 15 Indonesian soldiers beating up a colleague in the middle of the road, trucks of armed troops driving up into the mountains, navy craft unloading at the docks.

The most telling scenario, however, was the sight of a unit of Indonesian soldiers, guns held high, working out on a road near one of Dili's markets. As the yelling, sweating, armed men ran down the middle of the road, Timorese walking to the market quietly stepped to the side of the road, eyes down, to let them pass. For me it was a moment of truth, a painful reminder that power does come from the barrel of a gun and the Timorese know it.

The door to East Timor has been unlocked after 14 years. How wide it will open and how far outsiders may venture into the room will only be revealed by testing the decision. One can only hope that among the tourists and opportunists who will undoubtedly make their way there, there will be a healthy representation of the sensitive and well-briefed.

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Note: copies of my fuller narrative account are available from the ACFOA Human Rights Office, 124 Napier St, Fitzroy 3065. Tel. 417 7505.